The ten years that Jane Costlow spent writing *Heart-Pine Russia* were certainly well spent. Her study of the reality and metaphor of the Russian European forests is a richly woven tale of the importance, power and meaning of this unique cultural space. It is an intriguing premise – what do the forests and trees actually mean – that is explored and developed through literature, visual arts, icons, environmentalism and ethnography. The sense of place and self, ways of being in the natural world and being Russian take shape, as Costlow promises in her introduction, as “a dense tissue of stories, images, and metaphors, a thick braid of meanings that emerge over time as authors and artists explore the emotional resonance and cultural significance of place” (p. 5). The context of the discussion is broad – the nineteenth-century “Forest Question,” the twentieth-century ecology movement and the transcendent qualities of the forests and those artists, scientists and dwellers who perceive them. The book takes the reader from what may be the familiar territory of Turgenev and Korolenko and painters such as Shishkin, Repin and Nestorov into the lesser known terrain of Pavel Mel’nikov-Pechersky, the speeches and essays on the debates about deforestation and Dmitrii Kaigorodov, Russia’s first climatologist. Costlow connects her detailed analyses to greater names – the ideas of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, for example, provide a philosophical backdrop – but the insights and interpretation of her ideas on the forest through visual art and literature stand on their own. Costlow moves seamlessly from the finer points to the larger truths of her thesis on the epistemologies of place.

Turgenev’s “Journey into Polesye” is a fitting place to start, as the geography of the place itself suggests, in various ways, the edge of a mysterious and protective forest. Here, Costlow explores themes of biculturalism, ways of knowing, and the customs and practices associated with the forest that skew power struc-
tures within its realm. As Costlow shows, Turgenev’s story becomes a “model of possibility” as two cultures – gentry and peasant – map their identities on the same ground, searching for a spiritual and cultural home in the vast forest. As the locus of a “distinctively Russian contemplative epistemology” (p. 32), the Russian forest becomes sacred space, associated with a certain authenticity and tradition of monasticism. This Costlow demonstrates mainly through the work of Mel'nikov-Pechersky, which treats the forest landscape as a pious and essentially Russian space – a utopia protected by a ring (okolitsa) of boggy marshland – that stands in righteous defiance of oppressive leadership (in the tradition of Old Believers) as well as the “fractious, radical modernity of St. Petersburg” (p. 41). Again, the quiet and perceived emptiness of the forest is fundamental in the perception of its meaning. As in the vita of Avvakuum, the Eden of the nineteenth-century forest is one of peaceful coexistence between humans and animals, among humans in communities informed by the principle of sobornost’ and the monastery at its epicenter. Painters like Shishkin support this notion of the “natural church” and the sublime implicit in wilderness and folk myths like the legend of the deliverance of Kitezh, a city only the truly pious can perceive.

In addition to the perception of mythically sacred places, there was deep discussion in nineteenth-century Russia about scientific ways of “seeing” the forest and its destruction. Costlow turns her attention to the “Forest Question,” using records of governmental policy, public discussion, literary description and painting – including an outstanding reading of Repin’s 1883 “Procession of the Cross” – as both a context for discussion and a rich source of information and attitudes. The forest, especially to Tolstoy, becomes a measure of social morality and duty among the gentry while serving as a symbolic landscape that represents proper social organization. This second half of Costlow’s study more explicitly links the aesthetic representation of the forest with issues of modernity and the burgeoning of a more contemporary environmental ethos in early twentieth-century Russia. These final three chapters circle back to the works discussed in the first three; Korolenko and Nesterov “revisit” Mel'nikov-Pechersky’s ideas with greater focus on the effect of modernity on his “Holy Wilderness” and an early glimpse of the ecological potential in the plight of the disappearing Russian forest. Academician Dmitri Kaigorodov’s work most explicitly links the aesthetic and environmental by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Finishing Costlow’s study, the reader may feel as if (s)he were emerging from a long walk in an old forest with its contemplative purpose among nature’s patterns completely realized. True beauty (and its meaning), as Gogol wrote in Dead Souls, happens neither in nature nor art, but only when the two combine.